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COMMENTARY

Ban assails the rights of millions of women

BY FERN ETTINGER

The Senate recently rejected an amendment offered by Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., and Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, thus reaffirming that health care reform is about expanding access to health care for all -- not curtailing women's access to critical health services.

This amendment mirrors U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak's amendment included in the House-passed health care bill. The Stupak language is an egregious assault on women's rights. It goes far beyond the status quo, depriving millions of women of abortion coverage, including those who now have such insurance.

As a religiously affiliated organization, the National Council of Jewish Women believes that the Stupak amendment is an enormous step backward for those who believe in the separation of religion and state. The Stupak amendment favors one religious view of abortion and enlists the federal government to enforce it. One religious belief system must not be imposed on all of us at the expense of public health.

Furthermore, providing affordable, accessible health care to all Americans is a moral imperative that unites Americans of many faith traditions. The selective withdrawal of critical health coverage from women is both a violation of this imperative and a betrayal of the public good.

In adopting the Stupak abortion coverage ban, the House jettisoned a compromise already worked out that would have maintained the status quo in regard to government funding for abortion care. The Stupak amendment would apply a new, far-reaching coverage ban, barring women from using their own funds to purchase comprehensive coverage that includes abortion services through the new insurance exchange. This amendment ignores the reality that one in three women will have an abortion by the age of 45.

The thousands of NCJW members in Michigan share the belief that it is our social and moral obligation to ensure access to high-quality comprehensive health care services at every stage of life. Reforming the health care system in a way that guarantees affordable and accessible care for all is not simply a good idea -- it is necessary for the well being of all people.

The House and Senate will have to merge their versions of the health care bill before it can go to the president for his signature. The House would do well to follow the Senate's lead and support meaningful health reform that does not include a new, sweeping coverage ban on abortion. American families should have the opportunity to choose health coverage that reflects their own values and medical needs.

Fern Ettinger is co-chair of state public affairs for the National Council of Jewish Women, greater Detroit section.
